

18 October 2019

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
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Dear Committee Secretary

Clarification of evidence given at Senate Committee hearing – 9 October 2019

I refer to my appearance as a witness at the hearing for the Senate Community Affairs References Committee for inquiry into Centrelink's compliance program on 9 October 2019.

During my evidence, I responded to a question from Senator Askew in the following exchange:

Mr Townsend: I should say that we typically don't see people who have had that occur. We see people who have had a debt raised. Whether or not that's properly characterised as an error, I suppose that's a matter for debate. What's clear is that, for many of the clients who come to us who have had a debt raised against them, once they seek review, they find that the debt which has been raised against them was raised in error.

Senator ASKEW: Is that with the provision of further information?

Mr Townsend: Sometimes with the provision of further information, but, for example, as I indicated in my opening, in the matter of Deanna Amato, it turned out that, on close examination of the material on her file, she had properly disclosed all of her income and, accordingly, the debt was found to be incorrect. So there are clearly many instances where it is a matter of looking back at the original declarations. She is a good illustration of a case where somebody has wholly complied with their obligations to report to Centrelink in the first place and nonetheless has found herself subject to a debt down the track

I have reviewed the proof transcript on the Australian Parliament House website and consider that a clarification of my response may assist the Committee to resolve any potential ambiguity.

I note that our client Deanna Amato's debt was reduced to \$1.48 (and that balance waived) after Centrelink exercised their information gathering powers, not on the basis of information previously provided by our client.

However, our client Madeleine Masterton had her debt set aside after filing her Federal Court application on the basis that Centrelink accepted her income declarations made at the time of receiving payments.

Please do not hesitate to contact me [REDACTED] if you have any questions about this response or other information in my evidence.

Yours faithfully

Joel Townsend

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